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Lithiasis

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LITHIASIS

Today, I am antilithic. A lithoclast. A stonebreak. My dog has been urinating blood—the vet says she has bladder stones, and as I write this, she will go into surgery in an hour, my bark-honey. I am against it, her bladder in its lithecstasy.

When the vet diagnosed her, the first thing I thought was how strange it was that we can create stones in our bodies—we are each our own earth, a piss-flower geology within the petrific stress of a corpus, with a personal tectonics. I saw the cluster of white pebbles in her bladder on the x-ray.

I had just come from a vacation in southern Utah, been thinking about rocks for weeks. I had been trying to make sense of the layers—that the Navajo sandstone at the top of the rocks in Zion is the same layer of sandstone in the middle of Capitol Reef and the same near the bottom of formations at Arches near Moab. In Arches, a layer called the Dewey Bridge Member sits atop the Navajo sandstone, the Dewey layer a thick, red portion of the Entrada sandstone that stretches above it as orange as western evening clouds.

The Navajo sandstone lithified from the pressure of its own accumulation; it began as dunes blown into Utah from the north and northwest during the Early Jurassic period, 206-180 million years ago.¹ Later, during the Middle Jurassic, 180-140 million years ago, the Entrada sandstone was sillage deposited by rivers running through southeastern Utah. It was mudflats, beaches, and dunes, until it, too, hardened to stone. The stratification would be lost beneath superface if not for pressure from the Pacific Plate pushing against the North American, lifting the Colorado Plateau up above

1 Utah Geological Survey: <http://geology.utah.gov/utahgeo/geo/geohistory2.htm>

sea level, during the Paleocene era, 65-55 million years ago. The Plateau's uplift exposed the rocks we saw in Zion, Capitol Reef, Lake Powell, Monument Valley, and Moab, and it continued to rise until in some places it exceeds 10,000 feet in elevation.

In dog bladders, stones form from an overabundance of minerals, in my dog's case, struvite, or ammonium magnesium phosphate. The struvite crystallizes in the urine, and the crystals harden into stones.² The condition is called canine urolithiasis, and the stones are referred to as "uroliths." This day of my dog's surgery, my husband takes me out to breakfast and to the bookstore to take my mind off of it. I am so wound up that I can't look at anything but board games, the bright red boxes and their descriptions of rules I already know. I wait and wait for the call that the dog is OK.

That dog is what I have. And what I mean by that is I'm one of those people who treat their dogs as the children they don't have. I don't dress her up, except maybe in her skeleton costume at Halloween, and I don't take her out in a stroller, but she's my favorite running partner, my nap collaborator, and my someone-to-feed. She's the only pet I've ever chosen myself—my parents had cats and a dog, and when my husband moved in with me, he brought his cats, but I rescued this dog from an owner who kept her confined to a porch where she had to sleep, eat, drink, urinate, and defecate all in the same place, which does not feel natural for dogs. Especially for a blue heeler like her, bred to run on cattle drives across the outback. Her owner didn't want her anymore, was going to have her put down. My husband was gone for the year on a business trip. That dog and I needed each other and still do.

In Monument Valley, my husband and I stayed at Goulding's Lodge, tucked into a hillside made of Permian Organ Rock shale and

² Merck Veterinary Manual: <http://www.merckvetmanual.com/mvm/index.jsp?cfile=htm/bc/130616.htm>

de Chelley sandstone,³ deposited 299-251 million years ago and red with iron oxide, hematite (from the Greek for “blood stone”). We ate lunch next to a German couple and their three small children. They jabbered in German until one of the kids got to a maze in his activity book that had instructions he couldn’t read. His mother read, in English, “Help the sheep get back to the hogan.” I started to cry. Uncontrollably. I wanted to take someone out to lunch, feed him a half-size Navajo taco, and read his maze instructions to him. My husband and I had been diagnosed with infertility and had an appointment to see the specialist when we got back to Salt Lake City. I couldn’t take it—why were they so over-blessed with their three children when all I had was a dog who urinated blood? Who, admittedly, looked super-cute in a skeleton costume and had a smile bigger than the German children’s and eyes just as deep brown? But who couldn’t, admittedly, complete a maze, ask me to read maze instructions to her, or ask me anything, really. She would never surprise me with what she learned at school or say something like, “When I want to be dapper I wear my skateboarding shoes,” or brush her teeth next to me at night. My husband paid for lunch and I slunk out with my head down, hoping no one would see my wet eyes.

I’m reading the rules to *Yahtzee* (“Object: Roll dice for scoring combinations, and get the highest score”) when I get the call; the dog made it through surgery, had been surprisingly well behaved, and could be picked up the next day. When I go in to get her, the doctor has one set of stones washed and sealed in a canine-prescription-drug vial and another, unwashed, in another vial. I had been secretly hoping that she would give me the stones, but I didn’t know how to ask. She seems genuinely fascinated by the stones, says, “Sorry the vet tech didn’t wash these off; you can’t really see them

3 Utah Geological Association, http://www.utahgeology.org/road_logs/uga-29_first_edition/OP_guide/mvtribar.pdf

very well with all that blood. These that I washed, you can see really well." She shakes them and smiles. (Smiles!). The washed uroliths are large, four of them each as big as a hunk of gum. The unwashed are a collection of small river rocks, the kind they sell at gem stores for children to paw through looking for precious stones, but covered in my dog's blood. Blood stones. I shudder when I think that all of this was inside her. I feel it as a sour ache in the back of my mouth. I put both vials in my purse.

The dog goes on a special diet called "urinary s/o." The stones were alkaline, so this diet is supposed to balance her pH level by being highly acidic. Apparently, it's very fatty; "weight gain" is a side effect. She loves it so much that when I mix it with her old food, as you're supposed to in order to acclimate her digestive system, she spits out the old food onto the floor. Her incision is closed with a phalanx of little metal staples. To view them hurts me—she looks like a dog cyborg, perhaps bionic. I can't imagine how she isn't in pain, that metal puncturing her skin, except that I give her two dog-treat-flavored painkillers every day. She loves those so much that the sight of a pill bottle makes her sit at attention, she, a gourmand in her convalescence.

For the first couple of days, she's groggy and sleeps on a cushion she's pulled off the couch to use on the floor. Day three she wants to go for a run, but is forbidden. I run alone, miss the children telling me that they like my dog, that my dog is cute, that my dog can run fast!, can they pet my dog? But I finish faster, not having to stop to pick up her poop or wait for her to smell the fire hydrant, the tree, the fence, the yucca plant, the telephone pole...

She wears an Elizabethan collar, which she first feels is a punishment but later decides is a puzzle. We find the first collar on the floor in the hall after she jumps on our bed, mysteriously collar-

free. When she wears the second collar, we learn how she got the first one off; she rammed it into the bathtub so that the plastic cracked, then wore it until the crack went all the way through and the collar peeled off of her neck.

The second collar stays on after I duct-tape it both up-and-down and around. She doesn't understand why she can't go for walks and is frustrated that she has trouble going through doors—the collar catches on the baseboard or the door jam or the carpet. She can't even sleep in her crate on her favorite blanket because she can't get her head through the door.

Finally, two weeks pass and she can get her staples out. Even though I've been giving her an antibiotic religiously, I worry that they're going to say the cut is infected, or hasn't healed, and she'll have to have the staples longer. But they don't. They take her into the back—she looks at me in panic the moment she realizes that she's going without me, and my heart clenches—and she comes out just minutes later, pulling at her leash, ready to eat the treats the receptionist keeps on her desk. We drive home. She gets a three-mile run the next day.

My husband and I go to the infertility doctor and find out that we'll have to do in vitro fertilization if we want to have our own biological child. We cry for days, spend much of our time after work crying together while watching television. A conversation would be too pessimistic—neither of us knows what to say to make us feel better, or we would have said it, and to tell a joke or even be optimistic about our situation feels like disrespect for our grief. We have to have the TV on so there's a possibility that something funny or uplifting will happen. As if we couldn't help cheering at the Rockies' home run, please forgive us, unborn baby, because the signal was just coming into our home and we just happened to be there. We're always sad about you, baby-ghost, even when we're happy.

I scratch the dog inside her ears, which I discovered she liked

only when she was in the collar—she kept trying to scratch her head with her back legs and kept getting only plastic. It made me feel useful in a way I haven't before—I was the person who could take care of that problem, the itchy ear. It was my responsibility. That's the kind of relationship I'm looking for, one in which I'm expected to take care of a bunch of little kindnesses over a long period of time, so that they add up to taking care of someone. Something that built itself up from an accumulation of itself, a kind of autocthonous love, like sandstone, first an amalgamation of discrete grains of sand until, under the pressure of its own weight, it solidifies. That's the way I want to be with the person who will live inside my body until she's ready to be born.